

Unit 1

TENSE: Preterite

TIME: Refers to specific, completed past actions

KEY PHRASES: Certain time (last night, yesterday at 4:00, last July 4th); certain number of times

STRUCTURE: Simple tense: verb base + ending

The Preterite Tense

The **preterite tense** allows you to refer to specific past actions performed (1) at a fixed point in time, (2) a specific number of times, or (3) during an enclosed amount of time.

The key is the quantitative nature of the action. If the action is in the past and you can pin-point it as to when or how many times it occurred, you will use the preterite tense. It is as though there were a frame or box around the action. Consider the following sentences:

Fixed point in time:

I called you at 3:00.

He bought the car on Tuesday afternoon.

We saw the movie last night.

Specific number of actions:

I called you five times.

They ate ten sandwiches.

She read the book twice.

Enclosed amount of time:

I worked for eight hours.

The movie lasted two and a half hours.

He lived there for two years.

In each of the preceding sentences, the action's time is specific, measured in some way, either by the clock, the calendar, or number of times the action occurred.

It is important to remember that while an obvious feature of the preterite tense is how it quantifies action, we do not always state the quantity of our actions. When the quantity is not stated, it is generally implied. Consider these sentences:

1. *I went* to John's party.
2. We *ate* at McDonald's.
3. The meeting *was* boring.

In the first two sentences, the implication is that the person performed the action *once*. In the third, the implication is that the *entire* meeting, from beginning to end, was boring.

A good test for determining if a sentence is in the preterite is to consider if it is reasonable to ask "For how long?" or "When?" the action took place.

For example, if someone tells you, "John called me," you can reasonably ask, "When?" and expect a specific answer. But if this person says, "John used to call me several times a day," you probably would be wasting your time if you asked *when*.

In other words, "John called me" is in the preterite, while "John used to call me several times a day" is not (this latter sentence is in the imperfect tense, which will be discussed in the next unit).

Regular Verbs in the Preterite

To form regular verbs in the preterite you do the following:

-ar verbs: drop the -ar and add the following endings:			
		(I spoke, you spoke, etc.)	
-é	-amos	yo hablé	nosotros hablamos
-aste	-asteis	tú hablaste	vosotros hablasteis
-ó	-aron	él habló	ellos hablaron

Note that the *nosotros* form is identical in the preterite and the present tenses for -ar verbs.

examples:

Yo **hablé**.
I *spoke*.

Tú **miraste** la película.
You *watched* the movie.

Ella me **llamó** tres veces.
She *called* me three times.

Hablamos con Juan.
We *spoke* with John.

Vosotros **comprasteis** palomitas.
You *bought* popcorn.

Ellos **contaron** el dinero.
They *counted* the money.

-er and -ir verbs: drop the -er or -ir and add the following endings:					
		(I ate, you ate, etc.)		(I opened, you opened, etc.)	
-í	-imos	yo comí	nosotros comimos	yo abrí	nosotros abrimos
-iste	-isteis	tú comiste	vosotros comisteis	tú abriste	vosotros abristeis
-ió	-ieron	él comió	ellos comieron	él abrió	ellos abrieron

Note: Most stem-changing verbs change only in the present tense (*not* in the preterite), e.g., *contar* (to count): *yo cuento* (I count); *yo conté* (I counted). The exceptions to this are -ir stem-changing verbs, and are discussed under **irregular verbs**, on page 88.

examples:

Escribí una carta.
I *wrote* a letter.

Comimos pizza.
We *ate* pizza.

Vendiste tu casa.

You sold your house.

Rompisteis las ventanas.

You broke the windows.

Ella **bebió** tres vasos de leche.

She *drank* three glasses of milk.

Ellos **abrieron** las cajas.

They *opened* the boxes.

Before working with the preterite, it is important to be familiar with the more common preterite "markers," or words and phrases that indicate specific time frames. Several are listed below.

ayer yesterday

anoche last night

esta mañana this morning

esta tarde this afternoon

la semana pasada

el mes (año) pasado

hace _____

ayer por la mañana/tarde

last week

last month (year)

_____ ago

yesterday morning/afternoon

Para ti, ¿cuál es verdadero o falso? *Translate to English.*

- _____ 1. Hablé por teléfono ayer por la tarde.
- _____ 2. Comí una ensalada anoche.
- _____ 3. Abrí las ventanas en mi casa hace dos horas.
- _____ 4. Miré la televisión anoche.
- _____ 5. Bebí jugo de naranja esta mañana.
- _____ 6. Asistí a la escuela la semana pasada.
- _____ 7. Compré un coche el año pasado.
- _____ 8. Vendí mi casa el mes pasado.

ejercicio

II-I-f

1. I bought a shirt yesterday. _____
2. You studied last night. _____
3. She worked for two hours. _____
4. We washed the dishes. _____
5. They sang five songs. _____
6. I ran to the corner. _____
7. You wrote a letter. _____
8. She opened the door. _____
9. We didn't open those windows. _____

10. They sold the car. _____
11. We danced the tango last night. _____
12. They spoke with the owner. _____
13. I took a shower this morning. _____
14. You washed your hair. _____
15. They went to bed at eleven-thirty. _____

¡Te toca a ti!

Responde, con frases completas, a las siguientes preguntas:

1. ¿Hablaste por teléfono anoche? _____
2. ¿Dónde te compraste la camisa? _____
3. ¿Qué comiste anoche? _____
4. ¿Qué recibiste para tu último cumpleaños? _____
5. ¿Escuchaste la radio hoy? _____
6. ¿Tomaste café ayer por la mañana? _____
7. ¿Bailaste el fin de semana pasado? _____
8. ¿Estudiaste español el año pasado? _____

Orthographic Changes in Regular Verbs

There are three standard orthographic (spelling) changes in Spanish which affect verbs in the preterite as well as in other tenses. In the preterite, these changes occur only in the first person singular *yo* form. They are as follows:

1. verbs ending in **-gar**: insert a **u** before the **e**: **yo llegué** (I arrived)
2. verbs ending in **-car**: the **c** changes to **qu** before the letter **e**: **yo practiqué** (I practiced)
3. verbs ending in **-zar**: the **z** changes to **c** before the letter **e**: **yo empecé** (I began)

The reason for the first two changes is phonetic: in order to retain the original hard **g** and **c** sounds, the letter **u** is inserted (the letters **g** and **c** are soft before the vowels **e** and **i**). In the last change it is because the letter **z** *never* directly precedes the letter **e** in Spanish (except in rare cases when **ze** are the first two letters of a word).

Some frequently used verbs in these categories, with the preterite *yo* form:

llegar
jugar

to arrive
to play (a game)

yo llegué
yo jugué

pagar	to pay (for)	<i>yo pagué</i>
regar	to water (a plant)	<i>yo regué</i>
segar	to mow (grass, etc.)	<i>yo segué</i>
tragar	to swallow	<i>yo tragué</i>
vagar	to wander	<i>yo vagué</i>
aparcar	to park	<i>yo aparqué</i>
buscar	to look for, search	<i>yo busqué</i>
clarificar	to clarify	<i>yo clarifiqué</i>
clasificar	to classify	<i>yo clasifiqué</i>
destacar	to stand out	<i>yo destaqué</i>
empacar	to pack	<i>yo empaqué</i>
justificar	to justify	<i>yo justifiqué</i>
practicar	to practice	<i>yo practiqué</i>
sacar	to take out, take a picture	<i>yo saqué</i>
tocar	to touch, play (an instrument)	<i>yo toqué</i>
autorizar	to authorize	<i>yo autorizé</i>
comenzar	to commence, begin	<i>yo comencé</i>
empezar	to begin	<i>yo empecé</i>
organizar	to organize	<i>yo organicé</i>
rezar	to pray	<i>yo recé</i>
simbolizar	to symbolize	<i>yo simbolice</i>
trazar	to trace	<i>yo tracé</i>
tropezarse (con)	to bump (into)	<i>yo me tropecé</i>

Remember: Only verbs in the *yo* form are affected by these orthographic changes.

ejercicio
II-1-2

1. I practiced the piano for an hour. _____
2. I arrived at two o'clock. _____
3. I organized the party. _____
4. I began to dance on the table. _____
5. I played the guitar for two hours at the reception. _____

6. I played tennis with the pro (*el jugador profesional*). _____

7. I took twenty pictures of my cat. _____
8. I authorized the purchase. _____
9. I classified the information. _____

10. I bumped into your house's step (*el peldaño*). _____
11. I parked the car in a prohibited space. _____
12. I never stood out in English for my pronunciation. _____
13. I swallowed the medicine without thinking. _____
14. I paid the gas bill. _____
15. I watered my friend Lola's plants. _____

Final note: While these three types of verbs do not exactly follow the regular pattern of forming the preterite tense, they are still considered regular verbs in the preterite because these changes occur at *all* times in *all* tenses.

Irregular Verbs in the Preterite

There are several irregular verbs in the preterite. While patterns do emerge and the endings are similar, it is important to understand the various types of conjugations.

The following eleven verbs all take this set of endings:

-e	-imos
-iste	-isteis
-o	-ieron

1. andar to walk	anduv-	anduve; anduviste; anduvo ...
2. estar to be	estuv-	estuve; estuviste; estuvo ...
3. tener to have	tuv-	tuve; tuviste; tuvo ...
4. caber to fit	cup-	cupe; cupiste; cupo ...
5. haber auxiliary, to have	hub-	hube; hubiste; hubo ...
6. poder to be able to	pud-	pude; pudiste; pudo ...
7. poner to put, place	pus-	puse; pusiste; puso ...
8. saber to know	sup-	supe; supiste; supo ...
9. hacer to make, do	hic-	hice; hiciste; hizo ...
10. querer to want	quis-	quise; quisiste; quiso ...
11. venir to come	vin-	vine; viniste; vino ...

Note:

- Verbs 1–3 take the letter *uv* in the new stem; 4–8 take a *u*; and 9–11 take an *i*.
- The only exception above is the third person singular of *hacer*, which is *hizo*. (The *c* changes to *z* to avoid the *k* sound.)
- There are no accent marks on these irregular endings.
- For their full conjugations, consult the preterite verb chart in the appendix.